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Vatican: 'Holocaust denial unacceptable'

by Dennis Coday

VATICAN CITY

Remarks made by a traditionalist bishop who denied that millions of Jews were murdered during World War II are unacceptable, "foolish," and in no way reflect the position of the Catholic Church, said the Vatican's top ecumenist and major dialogue partner with the Jews.

"Such gibberish is unacceptable," said German Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews in an interview with the Italian daily *La Repubblica* Jan. 26.

"To deny the Holocaust is unacceptable and is absolutely not the position of the Catholic Church," he said, adding that the bishop's remarks were "foolish."

British-born Bishop Richard Williamson of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X has claimed that the Holocaust was exaggerated and that no Jews died in Nazi gas chambers.

Cardinal Kasper, who is co-chairman with Rabbi Rosen of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, told *La Repubblica* he could see how Bishop Williamson's opinions could "cast a shadow over (Vatican) relations with Jews, but I am convinced dialogue will continue."

The cardinal said removing the excommunication against the British bishop and the bishop's comments were two completely separate issues. By lifting the excommunication, he said, the pope was removing an obstacle to the Vatican's dialogue with the society.

"We will need to see in what way they accept the (Second Vatican) Council" before further steps toward reconciliation and unity can be taken, he said. In the past, the Society of St. Pius X has not accepted the liturgical reforms of Vatican II and its concepts of religious freedom and ecumenism.

A front-page article in the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, called Bishop Williamson's remarks on the Holocaust unacceptable, "very serious and regrettable."

The paper underlined the church's teachings against anti-Semitism, which are clearly outlined in the declaration "Nostra Aetate." The Jan. 27 article said these teachings were "not debatable" within the Catholic church.

It said the reforms the church adopted after Vatican II could never be jeopardized or "thrown into crisis by a magnanimous gesture of mercy" by the pope in seeking to reconcile with the traditionalist society.

The head of the Swiss-based society, Bishop Bernard Fellay, had requested the removal of the excommunication in a letter to the pope Dec. 15. Bishop Fellay wrote that he and the three other bishops illicitly ordained in 1988 were determined to remain Catholic and accepted the teachings of Pope Benedict "with filial spirit."

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He wrote: "We are ready to write the creed with our own blood, to sign the anti-modernist oath, the profession of faith of Pius IV, we accept and make our own all the councils up to the Second Vatican Council, about which we express some reservations."

Fellay added in his communique that "we are convinced that we remain faithful to the line of conduct initiated by our founder, Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, whose reputation we hope to soon see restored."

Meanwhile, the head of the Swiss-based society criticized the way the interview with Bishop Williamson had been conducted.

In a letter sent to the Swedish broadcaster, Bishop Bernard Fellay said it was "shameful to use an interview on religious matters to introduce secular and controversial issues."

The letter, dated Jan. 21, accused the television station of trying to misrepresent and smear the Society of St. Pius X.

Bishop Fellay said Bishop Williamson was "personally responsible for his own private opinions" concerning statements dealing with "secular issues."

The society's district superior of Great Britain, Father Paul Morgan, wrote in a Jan. 20 press release "We completely distance ourselves from all forms of racism and anti-Semitism."

However, "while the Society (of St. Pius X) rejects and deplores all and every prejudice and discrimination against" the Jews, "it cannot be described as anti-Semitic to pray for their conversion to the true faith, to study their recent and tragic history or to question some of their political objectives," he wrote.

French Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard of Bourdeaux said that resolving the many dogmatic and ecclesial questions remaining between the church and the society will be a journey that is "undoubtedly long."

But doctrinal issues are not the only thing making reconciliation difficult, said the cardinal, who is a member of the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei," which oversees the reconciliation of Lefebvre

Catholics with the church.

Cultural and political attitudes, such as those reflected in the "unacceptable" remarks by Bishop Williamson concerning the Holocaust, also can hamper full reconciliation, he said in a press release Jan. 24.

The Swiss bishops' conference said the traditionalist bishop's remarks "worsened concerns" over the "deep divergences" between the society and the Catholic Church.

The Swiss bishops condemned Bishop Williamson's comments and apologized to the Jewish community in Switzerland for the upsetting episode.

"Those who know Benedict XVI and his positive attitude toward Judaism know that the indefensible ravings of Bishop Williamson will not be tolerated," they said.

Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, president of the Italian bishops' conference, praised the pope's decision to lift the excommunications against the four bishops.

But, during a Jan. 26 meeting with bishops, he expressed his "displeasure over the unfounded and unjustified" comments made by Williamson.

Matthias Kopp, spokesman for the German bishops' conference, told German television ZDF Jan. 26 that, "sooner or later, Williamson will have to take back his statements," which he called unacceptable.

Germany's public prosecutor opened an investigation Jan. 23 to look into the traditionalist bishop's statements. The Swedish television interview with the bishop took place in Germany where it is illegal to deny the extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust.

Jewish groups expressed shock that after Bishop Williamson's comments were televised the Vatican would still lift the excommunication against him.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said in a Jan. 24 press release that the pope's decision "undermines the strong relationship between Catholics and Jews" and was "a most troubling setback."

He said the ADL was "stunned the Vatican ignored (its) concerns" after it wrote a letter Jan. 23 to Cardinal Kasper saying lifting the excommunication against a bishop who minimized the Holocaust and rejects the reforms of the Second Vatican Council would "become a source of great tension."

Foxman said the pope's gesture toward reconciling the bishop sent "a terrible message to Catholics around the world that there is room in the church for those who would undermine the church's teachings and who would foster disdain and contempt for other religions, particularly Judaism."

The American Jewish Committee expressed its "shock and regret over the Vatican's decision" in a press release Jan. 24.

Rabbi David Rosen, the committee's director of interreligious affairs, said, "It is a serious blow for Jewish-Vatican relations and a slap in the face of the late Pope John Paul II who made such remarkable efforts to eradicate and combat anti-Semitism."

Rabbi Rosen urged the Vatican to "call Bishop Williamson to task and to apologize for his deplorable comments regarding the Holocaust."

Ricard of Bourdeaux said Pope Benedict knew "the drama a schism represents in the church" and wished to "go as far as he could in extending his hand."

"The lifting of the excommunication isn't the end but the beginning of a process of dialogue," Cardinal Ricard said in a Jan. 24 statement.

"It doesn't regulate two fundamental questions: the juridical structure of the St. Pius X fraternity in the church and an agreement on dogmatic and ecclesiological questions. But it opens a path to travel together, which will doubtless be long and demand better mutual knowledge and esteem."

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